

April 29, 2014

The Honorable Madeline Hughes Haikala  
United States District Court  
Hugo L. Black U. S. Courthouse  
1729 Fifth Avenue North  
Birmingham, AL 35203

Dear Judge Haikala:

For the past four years I have been involved with Huntsville City Schools as a parent, a PTA President, and a Vice-President of the Huntsville Council of PTAs. Prior to becoming a parent, I spent eight years as a teacher in the Washington, DC area. These experiences have allowed me to appreciate the past three years of positive growth in Huntsville City Schools (HCS) under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Casey Wardynski. I have seen a system-wide commitment to providing the best education possible for all of Huntsville's students. In large and small group meetings and in one-on-one conversations, I have personally witnessed the Superintendent advocate for a school system that will benefit all city students, regardless of zip code or neighborhood. This kids-first commitment has become an indelible hallmark of Dr. Wardynski's tenure in Huntsville.

On Thursday, April 3, 2014, I had the opportunity to attend Commissioner Robert "Bob" Harrison's community meeting on education. I found it interesting that Commissioner Harrison would schedule his meeting at the exact same date and time as a Huntsville City Board of Education meeting. Most of the educational experts associated with the school system had to attend the regularly scheduled Board meeting and could not attend Commissioner Harrison's gathering. I was shocked and disappointed by many of the claims made by both Commissioner Harrison and members of his panel that evening. Several of their comments were either untrue or based on outdated statistics. Commissioner Harrison stated that only schools in his district were being affected by rezoning. I explain below why this is not correct. Dr. John Dimmock, a retired science professor from the University of Alabama in Huntsville, cited Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT) data from spring 2010—over a year before Dr. Wardynski was even hired—as proof of the performance gap between white and black students. At the end of the meeting, volunteers handed out copies of Commissioner Harrison's letter that he had submitted for your honor's review. After attending his community meeting and reading his letter, I felt the need to respond to his inaccuracies with my own letter in support of Huntsville City Schools.

In the first paragraph of page two of Commissioner Harrison's letter, he states, "I have not been offered an opportunity to meaningfully participate in the process of drafting the School Construction and Student Assignment Plan and in seeking Unitary Status by the Board of Education, issues pending before you." According to Madison County statute, the Act of 1821 established the role of the commissioners "to levy the county tax, establish, maintain, and discontinue county roads, bridges, and ferries." No further information is given regarding their

role in schools. According to the Huntsville City Schools bylaws, "The Huntsville City Board of Education is the policy-making body of the School District. Its powers and duties are set by state law. The Board is responsible for educational planning and evaluation, staffing and appraisal, school facilities, financial resources and communication." It is the role of the elected officials of the Huntsville Board of Education, not the Madison County Commission, to propose changes in school construction and/or student assignment and to attain unitary status.

The Superintendent and Board of Education have provided countless opportunities in a variety of settings for the public to learn about and comment on their Student Assignment Plan (hereinafter "Plan"). On January 16, 2014, the Superintendent presented an hour long detailed presentation of the Plan. The public was invited to ask questions and comment on the Plan that evening. Additionally, the Superintendent's presentation ran on Huntsville's education television channel (ETV) several times a day for many weeks. After introducing the Plan to the public, the Superintendent and Board Members met with elected officials as well as church and civic groups throughout the city. Community meetings were held at each of the six city high schools between January 30 and February 5, 2014. Members of the community had an opportunity to ask questions and make comments on the Plan at each of these events. The topics included not only the school assignment zones but also information regarding facilities, transportation, curriculum, safety, and Advanced Placement (AP) programs. The Superintendent, board members, and HCS staff members were available to answer questions at these one and a half to two hour sessions. I personally spoke with the Superintendent about the influence of the Plan on my sons' school. In addition to these community meetings, I am aware that the Superintendent frequently reaches out to community groups to share information about the school system. Rena Anderson, HCS Director of Community Engagement, confirmed that the Superintendent met with dozens of groups during the months of January, February, and March 2014. These groups included but were not limited to the North Huntsville Pastors Group (one of the groups that has spoken out against the Plan), the South Huntsville Civic Association, the Northwest Cluster of PTAs, the Huntsville Council of PTAs, the PTA presidents from individual schools, the Chamber of Commerce, The Schools Foundation, the Committee of 100, the Hispanic Parents Association, the Neighborhood Council Association, the Whitesburg Civic Association Officers, the Board of Realtors Association, and the Golden Kiwanis. Kenny Anderson, the Director of Multicultural Affairs for the city of Huntsville and host of a local television show, interviewed Dr. Wardynski about the Plan. On March 10, 2014, at another Board of Education meeting the Superintendent presented a summary of the legal brief that HCS filed in regards to the Plan. The community has had ample opportunities to learn about the Plan and what is going on in HCS. Ultimately, however, the responsibility of assigning students to schools and achieving unitary status rests with the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

In the last paragraph of page three of Commissioner Harrison's letter, he asserts, "In the Board of Education student assignment plan, no significant redistricting effort has been instituted in south or west Huntsville areas which are predominantly White." At his community meeting on April 3, 2014, he incorrectly claimed that Huntsville City Schools' student assignment plan only affected schools in his district. He specifically noted that West and South Huntsville schools were not being influenced. When an audience member asked how the Plan would affect South Huntsville schools such as Chaffee Elementary School or Whitesburg P-8 School, Commissioner Harrison admitted that he had not seen any changes for those two schools in either the Huntsville City



Schools Plan or the Department of Justice Plan. The Plan, however, calls for an increase from 14 percent to 19 percent of black live-in population for Chaffee and from 27 percent to 33 percent for Whitesburg. In the last paragraph of page thirty-three (originally marked page thirty by HCS) of the brief filed by Huntsville City Schools on March 10, 2014, several other schools are listed in regards to their increase or decrease in black live-in population. Clearly, schools outside of Commissioner Harrison's district are being affected.

In the first paragraph of page four of Commissioner Harrison's letter he states, "Students in majority Black schools lack access to the array of advanced courses and science programs at schools that are identified as racially White." When reviewing the enrollment information provided in Exhibit A.1 of Document 287-1 filed on February 26, 2014, by the Department of Justice, the enrollment for the 2012-2013 school year for Grissom High School is listed as 1787. For the same school year the enrollment of Johnson High School is listed as 560. For the upcoming 2014-2015 school year there will be twenty-five AP courses offered at Grissom and eight AP courses offered at Johnson. Johnson has one-third as many students as Grissom and therefore one-third as many AP courses. Additionally, during the 2010-2011 school year, the administrators at Johnson High School and Butler High School removed themselves from the A+ College Ready Program which works to "dramatically increase the number of students in Alabama taking math, science, and English AP courses, earning qualifying scores on AP exams, and attending and succeeding in college." This program provides professional development for AP teachers on Saturdays and during the summer and also offers cash incentives for teachers and students when students earn qualifying scores on AP tests. The teachers at these two schools were not interested in spending the extra time needed in professional development during the summer and on Saturdays. The current Superintendent has reestablished and grown AP programs at these two schools in order to provide all students with the opportunity to participate and succeed in these advanced courses.

Similar comparisons can be made at the middle school level. According to Document 287-1, Exhibit A, Page 3, the enrollments at Davis Hills Middle School (90 percent black) and Ed White Middle School (89 percent black) are 382 and 463 respectfully. The enrollments at Huntsville Middle School (79 percent white) and Hampton Cove Middle School (83 percent white) are 556 and 615 respectfully. According to Document 287-2, Exhibit B, Page 5, during the 2013-2014 school year, Davis Hills Middle School offered nine core honors/advanced courses, Ed White Middle School offered eleven, Huntsville Middle School offered fourteen, and Hampton Cove Middle School offered fifteen. The school with the largest total enrollment offers the most core honors/advanced courses and the school with the smallest total enrollment offers the least number of core honors/advanced courses irrespective of race.

In addition to my concerns about Commissioner Harrison's letter, I would like to address part of the Department of Justice's Student Assignment Plan. As a parent of two students at Monte Sano Elementary School, I have great concerns about the Department of Justice Plan to bus students from the top of Monte Sano Mountain down Bankhead Parkway to the Chapman School and Lee High School. On Tuesday, November 19, 1968, a fifteen-year old boy from Monte Sano was killed and twenty-one others were injured when a school bus in which they were traveling turned over three times on this curvy, steep mountain road while heading to Chapman Junior High. The Department of Justice Plan would pose significant safety risks for current students on that bus

route. If instead the intent is for buses to travel down Monte Sano Boulevard to Chapman and therefore avoid the risky route of Bankhead Parkway, these buses would pass directly by Huntsville Middle School on their way to the Chapman School. It defies common sense to have students travel past a closer school in order to attend one further away.

Finally, I would like to mention several initiatives that the Superintendent has or will be implementing to benefit Huntsville City Schools students, especially those in Northwest Huntsville.

- **Hiring Practices:** In the past, only principals interviewed and hired teachers to fill openings at their schools. This created an imbalance in access to highly qualified teachers. Obviously, some schools would receive a higher number of quality applicants than others. The Superintendent changed hiring practices so that applicants are first screened at the district level before being interviewed by school principals. This ensures that all schools have access to highly qualified teachers.
- **Digital 1:1 Initiative:** Beginning in the fall of 2012 all third through twelfth graders in Huntsville City Schools were issued a laptop to use in school and at home. This closure in the “Digital Divide” has allowed students to have access to current curriculum and resources. Huntsville City Schools has partnered with agencies throughout the city including the Public Housing Authority to make sure that students have access to the internet after the school day has ended. Additionally, students in kindergarten through second grade have access to iPads in the classroom.
- **Pre-kindergarten (PreK):** Over the past three years, Huntsville City Schools has invested \$2 million in local funding into its PreK program. Over 40 percent of current HCS kindergarten students attended a HCS PreK taught by a certified teacher and aide. This focus on PreK by our current Superintendent has allowed Huntsville to become a leader in PreK education throughout the state and more importantly has given countless students, especially those whose families may not have been able to afford it otherwise, access to a high quality PreK program.
- **Child Nutrition Program:** The current Superintendent has initiated three separate programs to ensure that students are well fed at the beginning of the school day, the end of their school day, and during the summer vacation. Because school cafeterias were designed for multiple shifts at lunchtime, serving breakfast can be a challenge. The Breakfast in the Classroom program brings breakfast to the students so that they can begin their school day on time and still have a chance to eat breakfast. Secondly, last summer a summer feeding program sponsored by the United State Department of Agriculture and provided by HCS served over 98,000 meals—three times more than any other school system in Alabama. Children under the age of eighteen were able to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner for free while adults paid \$2.50 for breakfast and \$4.00 for lunch or dinner. As the Superintendent stated in his State of the Schools Address on April 22, 2014, students need nutrition during the summertime as well as during the school year to continue growing and being healthy. Finally, a supper program has been initiated in seven schools during this school year to provide an evening meal for students and their families before they leave afterschool activities or extended day programs at the schools. This past month over 27,000 meals have been served. Both the summer feeding program and supper program have been placed in Title I schools.

- Jemison High School Busing Plan: Currently transportation is only provided for high school students who live more than five miles away from their school. With the building of the new Jemison High School in North Huntsville, 70 percent of the students will be within a two-mile radius of the school. Appendix D of the Plan allows for most of the remaining 30 percent, primarily those formerly assigned to Butler High School, to be provided transportation to Jemison High School. Students cannot learn if they are not in school. By providing bus transportation, HCS will ensure that students will be able to get to school on time regardless of weather or family situation.
- Jemison High School College Academy Magnet Program: By teaming up with area colleges, HCS will be able to allow high school students accepted into the Jemison High School College Academy Magnet Program to earn dual credit and graduate from high school with both a high school diploma and an Associates of Arts and Sciences degree at no additional cost to the students and their families. A similar program launched in Tampa, Florida, had over two thousand students apply for less than a thousand openings in the first year of this rigorous program. A similar program in Huntsville would attract strong students throughout the district and aid in the desegregation of Jemison High School.

Your Honor, I firmly believe that Huntsville City Schools is heading in the right direction to benefit all of its students. The current leadership team is committed to providing a world-class education for each and every one of its students. It is often said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. The Superintendent understands the importance of helping **all** students achieve the high standards set before them. I encourage you to listen carefully to the voices of those who are involved with the schools and who can provide insight and perspective on the current state of Huntsville City Schools.

Sincerely,



A. Kvach  
Vice-President for Family Engagement, Huntsville Council of PTAs

cc: Norman Chachkin  
NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Sarah Hinger  
U.S. Department of Justice